

had often before been made to cover as long a period, the use made of this liberality by the ministers was unusual. It had always been understood that the Houses should be called together every year, or every two years at utmost ; but Parliament was now left in abeyance till 1376.<sup>1</sup> Thus released from criticism, John of Gaunt's friends were for two years and a half absolute masters of England. His return to England in April 1374 facilitated the establishment of a system of official robbery, carried on for the benefit, not of a class or a party, but of a clique of his personal adherents.

The Duke was at the head of a small, but well-organised hierarchy of knaves, who made a science of extorting money from the public by a variety of ingenious methods. The three most active members of the Boyal Council at this time were Lord Latimer, the confidant of the Duke and the King; Lord Neville, Latimer's son-in-law and heir, bound also by indenture to serve John of Gaunt in peace and war with a regiment of retainers;<sup>2</sup> and Bichard Lyons, one of the wealthiest London merchants, the financier of the unscrupulous gang. The Duke, who would, in the language of another age and another hemisphere, have been known as the \* political boss/ secured to them complete control of the Privy Council board, where, accordingly, most of the \* big deals' were made, The commerce of the country centred on the depdt at Calais, through which all the wool and cloth exported had to pass, to be there taxed by the home government before it left the English lines. Bichard Lyons got leave from Lord Latimer and his other confederates on the Privy Council to carry his own wool direct to other ports on the Continent ; he also obtained similar licenses to avoid the taxation and competition of the Calais mart, for a number of other merchants who presumably bought them from him at a handsome figure. At another time, when his friends appointed him farmer of the customs of Calais, he took the opportunity to levy a higher duty than that authorised by Parliament. When called to account for thus robbing the merchants of

<sup>1</sup> See Ap.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas, *Historic Peerage, Nevill; Test. Vtt., 108; Chron\* Ang\*, 80 j*  
Dngdale, 296,